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ABSTRACT

A study examined the reading behaviors of college students--in particular it asked why aliteracy occurs among college students. A survey designed to identify the aliterate population was administered to a psychology class of 40 students from a variety of majors, and included both genders, some ethnic variety (mostly Anglo), and a range of ages. From the survey, 11 subjects were selected. To determine if the students read at an appropriate college level, the Nelson-Denny standardized reading comprehension test was administered to the eight students who responded. Results indicated that all performed above the twelfth-grade equivalent reading level. Of the eight, seven students showed up for individual interviews. Findings suggest that many of them had disliked reading as children and had fathers who limited their own reading to newspapers and work-related text; most mothers, and many sisters, were keen readers; and, while all indicated that they rarely read the textbook, five students expected an "A." All seven students identified themselves as aliterate on the survey; however, they all read something--while they were not leisure readers, they would read how-to manuals or skim chapters before a test. (Contains 5 figures of data and 21 references.) (CR)

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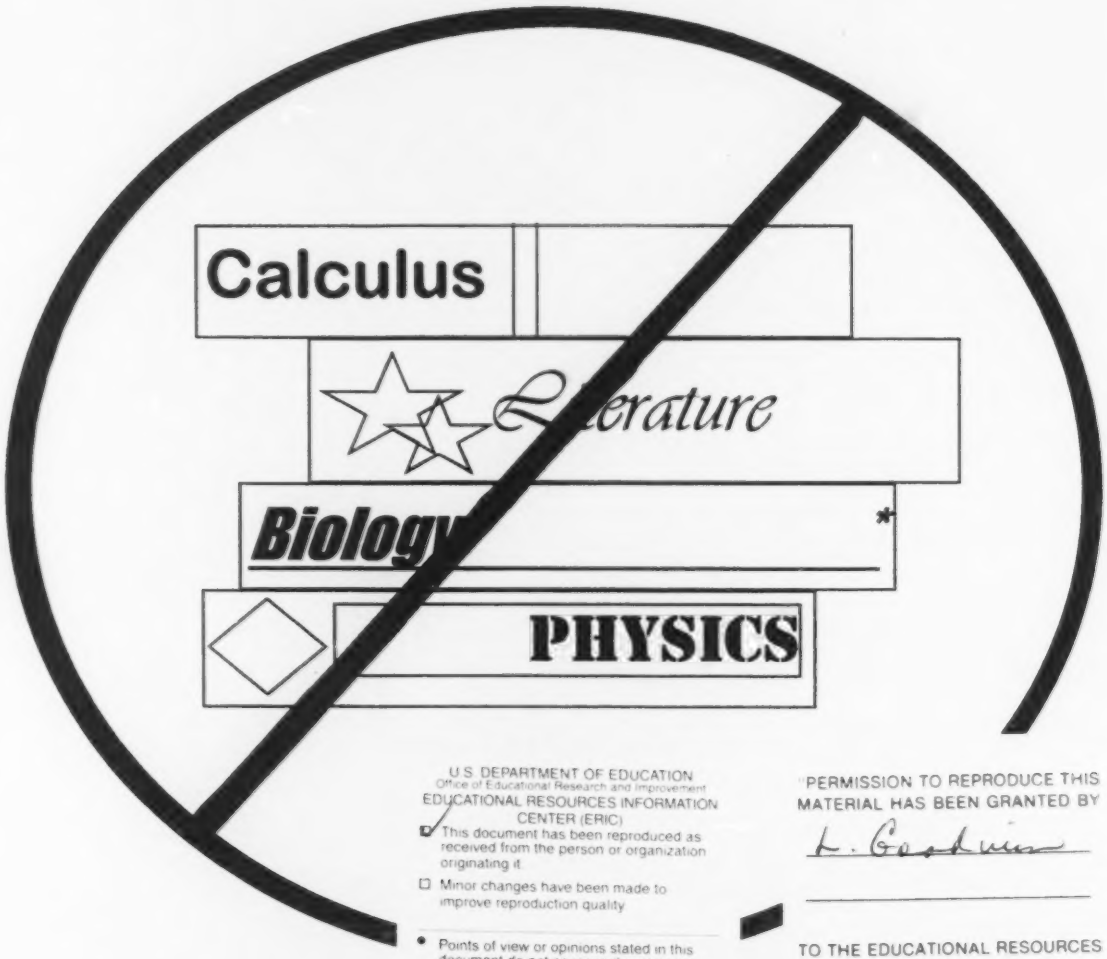
ALITERACY Among College Students



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WHY DON'T THEY READ?

CS012887

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Presentation at the College Reading Association
Charleston, SC, November, 1996

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> Textbooks, without question, are among the most important components of any educational system. Research in many countries and in different contexts has shown that textbooks have an important influence on teaching and learning. Textbooks exist at virtually all levels of the educational system, in most fields of study, and in all of the world's educational systems. Textbooks have been a key element in schooling for centuries, although their form has changed over time ....They are the least expensive, most reliable means of transmitting knowledge and providing coherence to the curriculum....And in educational systems that remain in many ways conservative, textbooks are tried and true (Altbach, 1991, p. 237).

The usefulness of textbooks in the transmission of knowledge in any educational setting is widely accepted. Textbook authors and publishers are becoming more skilled in developing texts that are attractive, well-organized and user friendly, and often, as a result, very expensive. With few exceptions, the syllabi of college courses mandate the purchase of at least one core textbook. In turn, college students frequently complain about the copious reading assignments and the financial burden of purchasing required texts. And professors frequently complain that the students aren't completing the assigned readings, and they certainly aren't critically thinking about the content. In the competitive job climate, where many job applicants need to have cutting edge skills and four-year degrees, why aren't these college students reading their textbooks?

The media and many educators believe that too many students enter college underprepared. Declining SAT scores and grade inflation are two indicators that college students just aren't made of the same academic stuff as past generations. Blame is laid at everyone's doorstep---lazy students, absent parents, seductive media, ineffective teachers, and an apathetic society. However, despite the fact that students appear underprepared, they <u>can</u> read. When standardized reading tests are

administered, most American college students perform at similar levels to those achieved by students twenty years ago, despite what some statisticians would have us believe (Kibby, 1993). My experience as a reading specialist at a four-year institution of higher education reinforces Kibby's findings. Most of the students with whom I work test at reading levels that are appropriate for college reading demands. They have the skills,but they're not reading.

ALITERACY

Concerns about illiteracy in our adult American population are frequently raised in the media. Illiteracy can be defined as "...the inability to read or write a language; specifically, `the inability to use reading and writing with facility in daily life'" (Harris, 1995, p. 112). The reading behaviors that are observed on college campuses are rarely cases of illiteracy; more accurately they reflect aliteracy. **Aliteracy** is simply the "...lack of the reading habit in capable readers." (Harris, 1995, p. 6). Because aliterates are capable readers, the implication is that aliteracy, including not reading textbooks, is a choice that is being made. The skills to accomplish the task are present, but the choice is to not apply them.

Figure 1 illustrates on a continuum the relationships among illiteracy, literacy, and aliteracy. Illiteracy is the defined starting point for the literacy continuum because it reflects an absence of literacy. Moving right indicates more development of literacy skills. At the functional level, skills are sufficient for daily life but not developed to the point that one may engage fully with all aspects of text. Approaching the critical literacy level, this engagement is possible and expected. (For detailed discussion about these

terms, see Harris, 1985.) College students would be expected to be functioning at the critical literacy level. Aliteracy spans all levels of literacy and is placed on a separate continuum. The open-ended continuums represent the fact that literacy skills continue to develop throughout one's life. Also, it acknowledges the existence of numerous "literacies," such as academic literacy and computer literacy, which could be placed on the existing continuum and beyond.

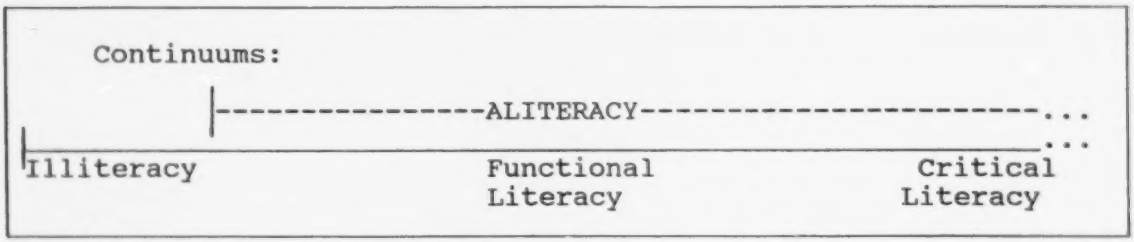

Figure 1. Literacy continuums.

Aliteracy could be called "the invisible epidemic." Literacy issues receive tremendous attention both in the press and research. However, little effort has been devoted to aliteracy, especially at the college level. A search of the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) database reveals only 21 articles pertaining to the topic. Of these 21, many are related to aesthetic reading which is pleasure related and not academically focused (Boorstin, 1984; Duchein, 1993; Hale, 1986; Spirn, 1988; Sullivan, 1985; Tanner, 1987; Thimmesch, 1984) and/or primary and secondary school-aged children (Canadian Teachers Federation, 1991; Decker, 1986; Heins, 1984; Mikulecky, 1978; Nespeca, 1990; Neuman, 1986; Sebesta, 1990; Wagner, 1994).

One notable exception was a dissertation that examined aliterate behaviors among a community college population. Joyce (1991) developed a more complex definition of aliteracy which incorporated six components: reading attitude, reading behavior, types of text read, range of reasons for reading, intensity of motivations for reading, and reading ability. While extending the base of knowledge about aliteracy, this research focused on the community college population and not that of a four year university. The goals of these populations can be quite different.

College students choose to attend college and presumably to attain a level of mastery over a chosen discipline in order to enhance their lives and careers. In requesting admission to study at a four year university, students should expect that high levels of academic ability and commitment will be required. Returning to the original question, why is it then that college students with adequate reading abilities choose not to read their texts?

This study was undertaken to better understand the reading behaviors of college students. In particular it asked, why does aliteracy occur among college students?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research question lent itself well to a qualitative research design in that it could be conducted in the natural campus setting with the researcher soliciting the perspectives of individual students. An ethnographic approach would necessitate inductively analyzing the student culture and behaviors. Most importantly, this research needed to focus "...on the singer, not the song" (Sherman & Webb, 1995, p. 111). We may speculate and accept assumptions about the underlying motivations

promoted by the media and experts removed from the college student culture, but without going to the students themselves, we're failing to tap the most knowledgable source. In this ethnographic study, variables would not be manipulated and hypotheses would not be formulated. Through interviews and open-ended guiding questions, the students would tell their own stories.

My interest in the topic of college student aliteracy is a direct result of teaching at a university and observing these behaviors first-hand. In light of time and budgetary limitations, the questions that I wanted to ask could best be answered by a micro-ethnographic study carried out on my campus. A psychology professor agreed to allow me access to one of his classes and I began at the start of the next term.

The class consisted of about 40 students from a variety of majors, including both genders, some ethnic variation (but mostly Anglo), and a range of ages. This was an evening session, so the population was more diverse than during the day classes. There were two required texts: one an introductory psychology textbook and the other a book of supplementary readings. The syllabus contained regular reading assignments from both texts.

In order to identify the aliterate population, I administered to the class a brief survey (Figure 2) which was designed to identify reading behaviors and attitudes. From this survey, I selected eleven students as potential participants. In order to determine if the students read at an appropriate college level, I administered the Nelson-Denny standardized reading comprehension test to the eight students who responded. All of these students performed above the twelfth-grade equivalent reading

level and were scheduled for two one-hour interviews.

Seven students showed up for the individual interviews and shared a wealth of information generated from the guiding questions (Figures 3 & 4). These interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded for broad themes that could be further analyzed. This was done in an ongoing fashion so that information from the earlier interviews could help revise the direction of the later interviews. Additional information came from a reading log that the students were asked to keep for one week, three observational visits to the class, and informal interviews with the professor. A summary of the participants' backgrounds and responses can be found in Figure 5.

RESULTS

There were some marked similarities in these students' backgrounds. Many of them disliked reading as a child and had fathers who limited their reading to newspapers and work-related text. Most mothers, and many sisters, were keen readers. These observations support Joyce's (1991) assertion that males tend to read newspapers and magazines, while women often are book readers. In addition, all of these students indicated on the survey that they rarely read the textbook, yet five of them expected an "A" in the class. Based on parental incomes and lifestyles, five of these students identified their families as middle class, while two of them categorized their families as upper class.

These seven students all identified themselves as aliterate on the survey; that is, they were capable readers but they frequently chose not to read the text. However, they all read something. They were not leisure readers, but they would read how-to

Figure 2.

RESEARCH SURVEY

Name_____

Major_____ Year_____

1. How frequently do you read the textbook assignments for this class? (Exploring Psychology by David Myers)
   NEVER RARELY SOMETIMES USUALLY ALWAYS

2. How frequently do you read the assignments from the reader? (Psychology 95/96 "Annual Editions" edited by K. Duffy)
   NEVER RARELY SOMETIMES USUALLY ALWAYS

3. How frequently do you read the textbook assignments for other classes?
   NEVER RARELY SOMETIMES USUALLY ALWAYS

4. How would you rate your reading abilities?
   POOR FAIR GOOD EXCELLENT

5. How important are textbooks?
   NOT AT ALL SOMEWHAT USEFUL HELPFUL VITAL

6. What grade do you anticipate in this class?
   F D C B A

7. Do I have your permission to monitor the records your professor keeps about you?
   YES NO

8. Would you consider being a part of this research project? This may include a twenty-minute reading assessment and follow-up, one-on-one interviews.
   YES MAYBE NO

Please sign this form if you are willing to be a participant.

_____
(Signature)

Phone Number _____

VAX Address _____

Figure 3.

GUIDING QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW 1

1. What do you think your professor expects of you as a student? What does he assume your role to be, especially in reading? Is he similar to other professors?

2. How do you decide what you will and will not read for a course? Under what conditions will you read or not read?

3. What do you feel to be the role of reading? In school? What's its purpose in education? Out of school? What's its purpose in the world? What is the role of textbooks?

4. How do you feel you fit into the class? Do other students read all of the assigned readings?

5. Have you changed your reading patterns? When? Why?

6. Do reading behaviors have anything to do with GPA?
...success in a career?
...participation in society?

7. Who or what has power/control in a classroom?
Who or what has power/control in a society?

8. (History of reading experience.) Describe learning to read...aesthetic reading...high school experiences...college.
Family reading attitudes/behaviors? Friends?

9. How do you learn best?

10. Why are you attending college?
What value do you place on learning?

11. How much time per day/week do you spend reading textbooks or course material?
How much do you spend on other types of reading?

12. What do you do instead of reading?

Figure 4.

GUIDING QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW 2

1. (With the course syllabus and texts in front of us...)
Which reading assignments did you complete? Did this make a difference when you read assignments? Why/why not? Did anything the teacher said encourage you to read/discourage you from reading?

2. What do you think about the selected topics? Why were these topics selected? Were there things not covered that should have been?

3. About the assigned research paper: topic? how did you choose this? length? where did you get your information? how much time did it take?

4. What is your grade in the class so far? How have you achieved this grade?

5. What did you expect the final exam to cover? How are you reviewing?

6. Do you always agree with the professor? Think of a time you disagreed/differed in opinion...

7. How would you define a literate person? Are you literate?

8. What are the "typical" reading behaviors of college students?

9. Can you become anything you want? Do people determine their own fates? What would limit you?

10. How would you classify your family---lower/middle/upper class? Why?

11. Do reading skills continue to develop after high school? How? Do you see yourself continuing to develop?

12. Have you taken a class that really challenged your reading skills? Describe it.

13. Has anything changed for you because you've been involved in this research?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

1. Age:
   - 18 - 1
   - 19 - 5
   - 22 - 1

2. Sex:
   - Male - 5
   - Female - 2

3. Class in College:
   - Freshman - 4
   - Sophomore - 2
   - Senior - 1

4. Degree Program:
   - Photojournalism
   - Information Technology
   - International Business
   - Electrical Engineering - 3 students
   - Graphic Design

5. Grade Equivalent Scores- Comprehension Subtest of Nelson-Denny
   - 13.2 - 1
   - 15.1 - 1
   - 15.6 - 1
   - 16.9+ - 5

6. Responses to Questionnaire:

	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	USUALLY	ALWAYS
A) How frequently do you read the textbook assignments for this class?	1	6	-	-	-
B) How frequently do you read the assignments from the reader?	-	-	-	1	6
C) How frequently do you read assignments for other classes?	-	1	4	2	-

	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCELLENT
D) How would you rate your reading abilities?	-	2	4	1

	NOT AT ALL	SOMEWHAT	HELPFUL	VITAL
E) How important are textbooks?	1	2	4	-

F) What grade do you anticipate in this class?
   - A - 5
   - B - 1
   - C - 1

7. Recorded number of hours spent reading during one week:
   - 23 - 1 student (19 on texts, 4 on other)
   - 16 - 1 student (11 on texts, 5 on other)
   - 15 - 1 student (5 on texts, 10 on other)
   - 6 or less - 4 students

manuals or they would skim chapters before a test. Most of these students only read what they felt they had to,to get by. The psychology professor quizzed them regularly on the supplementary readings, so most of the students would at least skim these articles. The text was tested only on the mid-term and the final exam, and then only a small number of the questions were exclusively from the text. The professor announced this in class and the students chose to skip the text assignments that were perceived to have little grade value. All of these students were looking for the most expedient way to pass the course.

In the initial interviews, the students undervalued their reading abilities. They voiced negative attitudes about academic reading (several felt that their learning styles were not verbally oriented) and they perceived themselves to be unskilled readers. Most of them were surprised to learn that they had done well on the standardized reading test. When further explored, these students discovered that they did enjoy certain aspects of reading more than they initially indicated. Because one student felt so guilty about having little to show on the week's reading log, he spent an entire Sunday reading a novel. These behaviors lend credence to Joyce's (1994) observation that "...aliterates view themselves as individuals who do not like to read and who avoid reading. This self-perception is critical in aliteracy" (p. 75).

Early educational experiences do not seem to foster a positive attitude toward reading, especially that related to academics. These students struggled to even remember their early reading experiences and their teachers during the formative language years of primary school. Only one of the students could remember a teacher

who had been an influential reading force. The reading methodology employed in these early years seemed to have contributed to negative reading attitudes. The emphasis placed on repetitious skill work and the over-analysis of literary works later in the educational process seem to have successfully killed any enthusiasm these students might have had for reading, especially in the academic environment.

The most positive influence on the students' reading attitudes came from their parents. In most cases, the mothers promoted leisure reading quite strongly and the students felt somewhat guilty that they had not become the readers of their mothers' aspirations. Even though the fathers read more selectively and more functionally, the students took note of these behaviors and emulated them. Several students mentioned reading newspapers and magazines when they were available.

The availability of print materials on the campus was raised as an issue by most of these students. The student newspaper comes out infrequently and there are rarely newspapers or magazines around the dorms. The students were not inclined to buy reading material; most of them indicated that spare change was needed for such essentials as laundry. While the library houses a variety of current periodicals, this is not a place that most of these students frequent. They are not inclined to go out of their way to read. The time constraints of an academic term also discouraged students from making an effort to do any extraneous reading, which would include assignments that would not be covered on a test. The students had concluded that most professors delivered the "important" (tested) information through lectures which eliminated the need for students to read with any rigor outside of class. It appeared, therefore, that

structural elements of higher education actually limited the reading behaviors of the students. The institutions themselves contribute to aliteracy.

What are the students doing if they are not reading? Despite the bad press, television was rarely mentioned. If it was watched, the students were inclined to watch the news instead of entertainment format shows. Many of these students found it necessary to work in order to afford their education. This consumed most of their leisure time. Some were involved with sports and clubs, but there was little discretionary time and this was not used for reading.

CONCLUSION

Aliteracy, its causes and consequences, is a complex issue and this research just scratched the surface. There are so many variables at play that it becomes difficult to unravel the complexities behind reading behaviors at the college level. The students themselves had a hard time talking about their reading attitudes and behaviors. It was obvious that they had done little thinking about these skills and their need for constant development. There was a level of passivity about the use of reading as a tool to further the acquisition of knowledge. The literacy identities of these students had received little conscious attention. The students seemed to be missing connections between learning and the world-at-large.

This research tapped just seven students out of a class of forty at a university of over 25,000 students. It would be difficult to make a case that aliteracy is an extensive problem on college campuses from such a small sample. However, these results are remarkably similar to those of Joyce (1991, 1994) and they are representative of

behaviors and attitudes that are played out daily in the developmental reading classes that I teach on this campus. Therefore, these seven students seem representative of a segment of the college population that may be found on most college campuses.

Altbach may be correct when he extolls the everlasting virtues of textbooks, but for a portion of the college student population these textbooks will go unbought and unopened. The aliterates have not yet reached the level of critical literacy where reading is enjoyable, challenging and educational---to them it's just work, and not work of the highest priority.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are many questions that need to be asked and answered concerning college students and aliteracy. This area is a fertile place for further research. One of the goals of this paper was to demonstrate the usefulness of qualitative research applied to the literacy domain. Some directions for further research might be explorations of questions of these types:

What value does higher education place on literacy development?

Do males and females approach reading activity differently at the college level?

How are computers affecting literate behaviors?

How have professors changed their perceptions of student literacy levels? How have they altered instruction?

Do student reading behaviors vary by major? by cultural background?

Compare the attitudes and behaviors of critical readers to aliterates.

How do literacy habits and attitudes change as one progresses through college?

When reading skills are not used, do they deteriorate?

Is aliteracy a problem? For whom? Why?

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